

Testimony, prepared by Jacquelynn Moffett
President, Homes for Black Children
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Homes for Black Children was founded in 1969 for the purpose of finding homes for the many children awaiting adoption. At that time, it was believed that Black families would not, or could not adopt. In the early sixties, many of the African American families coming forth to adopt children were turned away by the traditional agencies because they did not meet the adoption criteria established by these agencies., e.g. home ownership, stay at home mom, etc. African American families were not seen as a resource for the many waiting children languishing in foster care.

Our agency was built upon the fundamental belief that the community would respond to the needs of the children. We believe that the key areas of focus should center upon the emotional and physical stability of the family, and their ability to love and nurture a child that they did not give birth to. With the utilization of these pioneering community based practices, and a willingness to make our services available *within* the African American Community, Homes for Black Children successfully placed more than 270 children in its first two years of operation and changed forever the myth that African American families do not adopt.

Because of our efforts, Homes for Black Children has been recognized in the Congressional Record, served on White House Committees on Adoption and Family Preservation, and recognized in many publications, including our own Detroit Free Press and News, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the Children's Defense Fund, Ebony, Essence, Mirabella, the Ladies Home Journal magazines. Models of our adoption program have been duplicated in England as well as in Australia.

In 1986, Homes for Black Children in partnership with "the Wayne County Department of Social Services," conducted a study with the University of Michigan to look at Protective Service Intervention Practices. Our belief was that many of the African American children removed from their families experienced culturally insensitive decisions about their families. The study proved that once protective services were given culturally sensitive training, the number of children removed from their families decreased.

Almost twenty years later, the problems of disparate decision making continues for African American Children and their families. Although nationally, African American Children make up only 15% of the population, they represent more than 41% of the foster care population. African American Children are 4X more likely to enter the foster care system as a white child. Whereas the average length of stay for a white child is 10 months, it is nationally 17.9 months for an African American child.

In our own state of Michigan, the figures are equally grim: although African American Children represent 17.48% of the state population, they represent 52% of the foster care population in Michigan. African American children are more likely to be removed from

their families due to neglect, rather than the general population whose children are removed for physical or sexual abuse. Many African American children are removed from their families for reasons related to poverty. Additionally, their families are less likely to receive mental health or drug rehabilitation services.

In response to these troubling statistics, our agency asked to partner with the Family Independence Agency Family in the Family to Family Initiative three years ago. We did so because we believed that the practices of Family to Family could help stem the tide of the overwhelming over representation of children of color in our own foster care system:

- Family to Family is community based. Agencies must have a physical presence in the community in which they work. This gives the family access to treatment, as well as the opportunity for increased visitation. Many of the families that we work with have transportation challenges: it is vitally important that the family be able to access the service.
- The family case review focuses on the needs of the child; and comes from the concept that it takes a village to raise a child. At this meeting, anyone who has an interest in the child is invited to plan for its future. If the family is not a suitable placement at this time, other family members can come forth to plan for the child. This is a wonderful resource for the child because it means that the child never has to enter into foster care. It is my belief that the foster care population in Michigan is reducing because of the case reviews. Supports within the community are identified and the children don't have to come into care. The case review also serves as a safety measure to protect children from entering the system because of issues related to poverty.
- The family case review creates a partnership with the family from the onset, and holds them to a stringent role of accountability. The community acts as a watch dog for the parent as well as the provider to make certain that the agreed upon conditions of the plan are met.
- When it is necessary for a child to come into care, it is our goal as a child placing provider to do as little harm as necessary to the child. The very nature of leaving your parents and being placed with strangers is a traumatic event in the life of a child. This trauma is exacerbated when the child also has to leave your entire support system of school, neighbors, friends, and relatives, e.g., everything that represents security. The focus of staying within a child's own community softens the blow of foster care. Theoretically the child can continue in its same school, and maintain existing relationships.
- Community Based placements make Family Reunification more likely. Statistically, families who visit more often are more likely to reunify their families. The family case reviews help to introduce the family to unknown

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supports within the community, and help them to identify and connect to healthy and positive aspects of community life which increase the likelihood of return home. We have to rid ourselves of our social arrogance, that resources do not exist within that child's own community.

It is important that children remain in their own communities. Dr. Robert Hill of the University of Chicago, and pioneer author of "The Strengths of Black Families," research indicates that even after termination, as children age out of the system, they return to their families and their community. This research suggest that as social workers, our work is within the community. It is imperative to impact the cyclical nature of foster care. It is my belief that by working with families within their own neighborhood, this can be accomplished.